



# WHO SPEAKS FOR DEVELOPMENT?: MESSENGERS EXPERIMENT

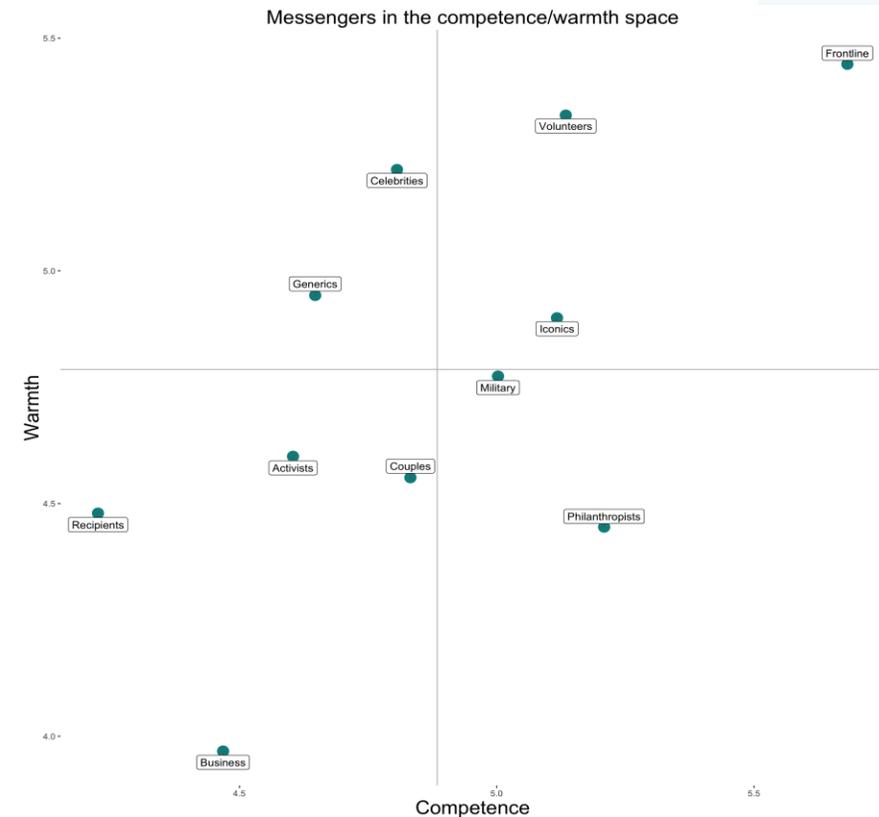
/ GB Partner Meeting  
// 5 December 2025  
/// [www.developengagementlab.org](http://www.developengagementlab.org)

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# AID ATTITUDES TRACKER – 2016 MESSENGER TEST

- 11 groups
  - activists, aid recipients, business, celebrities, frontline workers, military, philanthropists, volunteers, people like me, iconics, messenger pairs
- 10 traits
  - likeable, trust, caring, attractive, authentic, inspirational, experienced, knowledgeable, relatable, believable
- 42 messengers
- Messenger influence on likelihood of donation and signing petition

- Warmth (likeable, relatable) & competence (knowledgeable) dimensions



# KEY FINDINGS

- Use messengers that are viewed as warm & competent; pair messengers to combine traits
- Ratings were good indicators of ask/action
- Frontline workers
  - They work for all socio-demographics & partisans – universally good
- Celebrities are warm, but not competent and don't move people to action
- Businesspeople were worst-scoring group and generally don't work for anyone

# WHO CAN SPEAK FOR AID & DEVELOPMENT?

- Bono, we are not in Kansas anymore
- Competitive, 24-7 news cycle, social media, misinformation, polarisation & AI
- End of the single face messenger: can't cut through in fragmented landscape
- Who has reach, is influential & persuasive
  - Portability, facilitation



# AID & AID ADJACENT MESSENGERS (70)

- Traditional messenger clearly linked to aid/poverty reduction (e.g. Marcus Rashford)
- Focus on aid adjacent messengers, those who speak to related issues, but less explicitly aid or development (e.g. Pete Greig)
- Academics (e.g. Amartya Sen)
- Frontline Workers (Fictional)
- Local Activists/Campaigners (Fictional)
- Aid experts/officials (e.g. Antonio Guterres)
- Celebrities & public figures (e.g. David Attenborough, King Charles, Kate Middleton)
- Faith Leaders (e.g. Pope Leo, Zara Mohammed)
- Journalists (e.g. Louis Theroux)
- Influencers (e.g. Dr. Ranj Singh)
- Athletes (e.g. Marcus Rashford)
- Global South Influencers (e.g. Boity Thulu)

# NON AID-ADJACENT MESSENGERS (40)

- Mostly 'pure influencers'
- Rose to fame from online activity/presence
- Many steps removed from aid & development
- Tested for 'transferability' from their core issues to aid issues
- News, world affairs & public understanding (e.g. Alexander Dragonetti)
- Science, evidence & 'how the world works' (e.g. Professor Brian Cox)
- Climate, sustainability & eco-living (e.g. LessWasteLaura, Sam Bentley)
- Travel & exploration (e.g. Drew Binsky, Eva Zu Beck, Mike Corey)
- Sport & global athletes (e.g. Lionel Messi)
- Gamers, streamers & digital entertainers (e.g. Grian, LDSshadowLady)
- Lifestyle, family & everyday wellbeing (e.g. Stacey Solomon, Mrs. Hinche)
- Identity, social justice & culture (e.g. Munroe Bergdorf)

# TRAITS WE TESTED

FAMILIARITY



Heard of the messenger before

WARMTH



Tolerant, warm, good natured, sincere

COMPETENCE



Competent, confident, independent, competitive, intelligent

IDEOLOGICAL ALIGNMENT



Messenger on left-right ideology scale

“Overseas aid is essential for supporting equitable and stable societies by improving access to basic needs like water, education and healthcare”



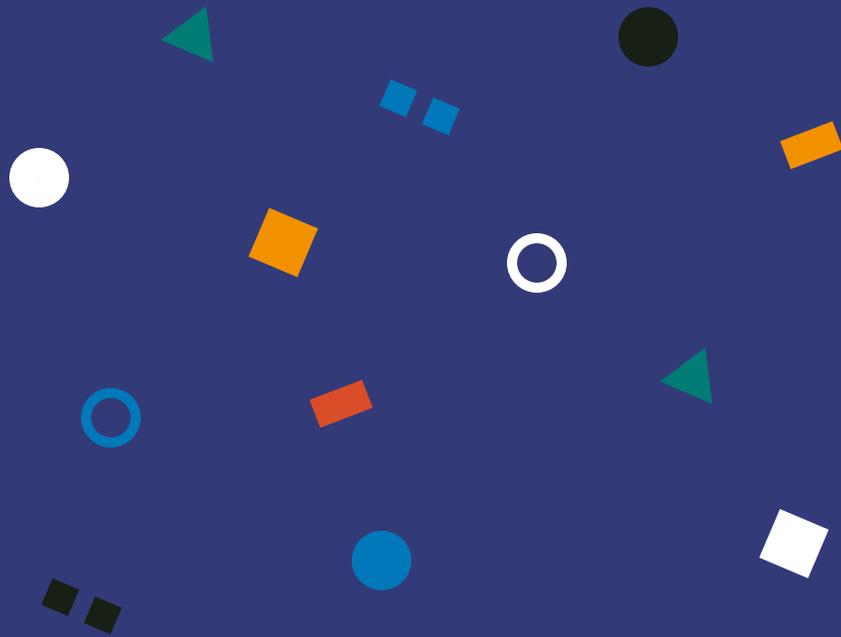
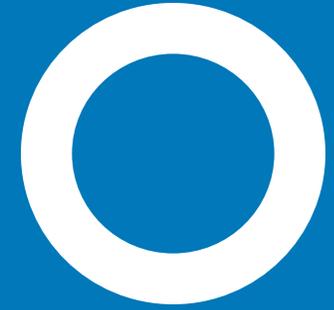
Message shown to aid-adjacent messengers only; aim is to understand whether messenger influenced respondents' agreement (or disagreement) with message



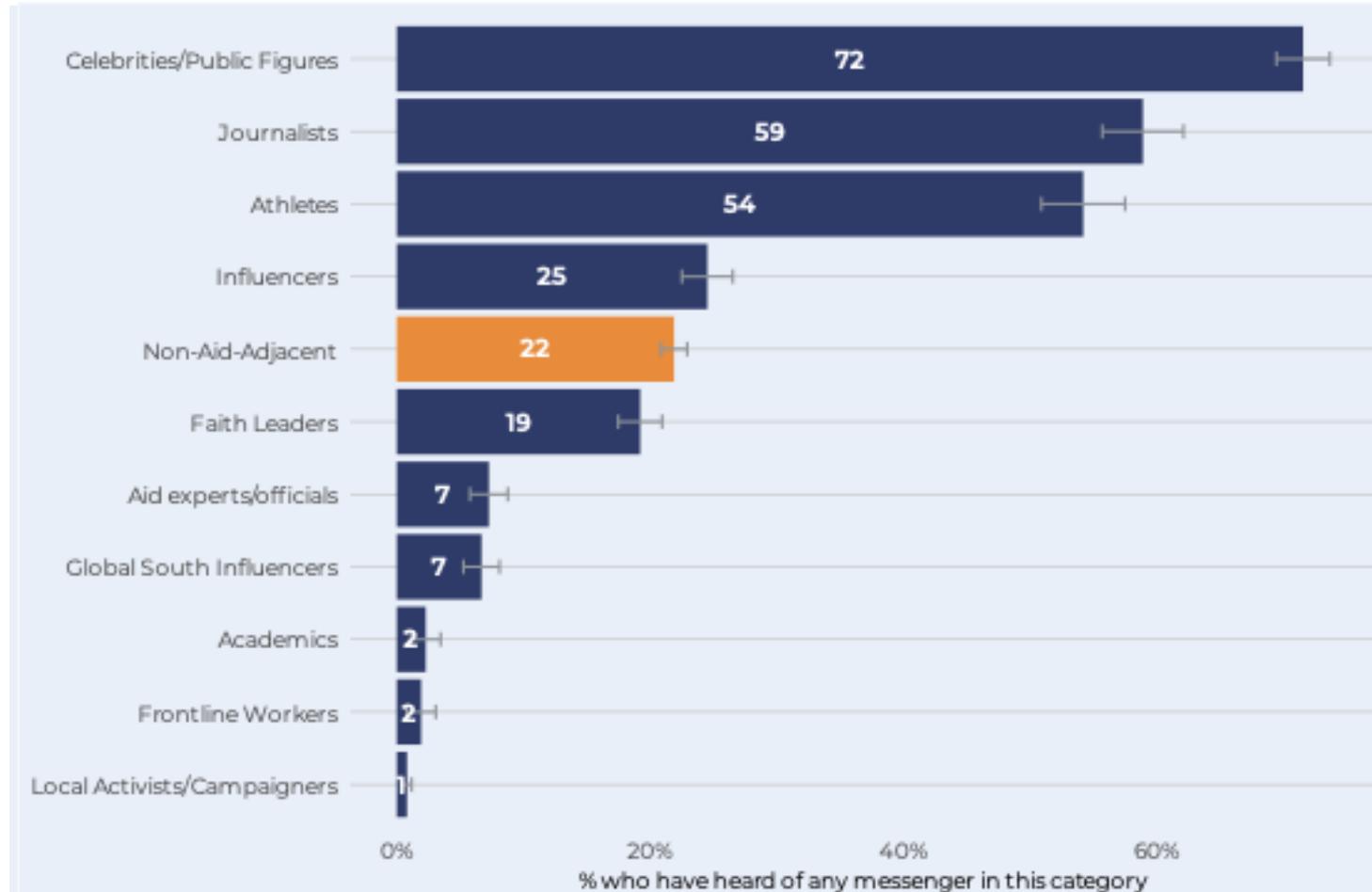
# AID-ADJACENT MESSENGERS



# DESCRIPTIVES



# FAMILIARITY BY MESSENGER TYPE

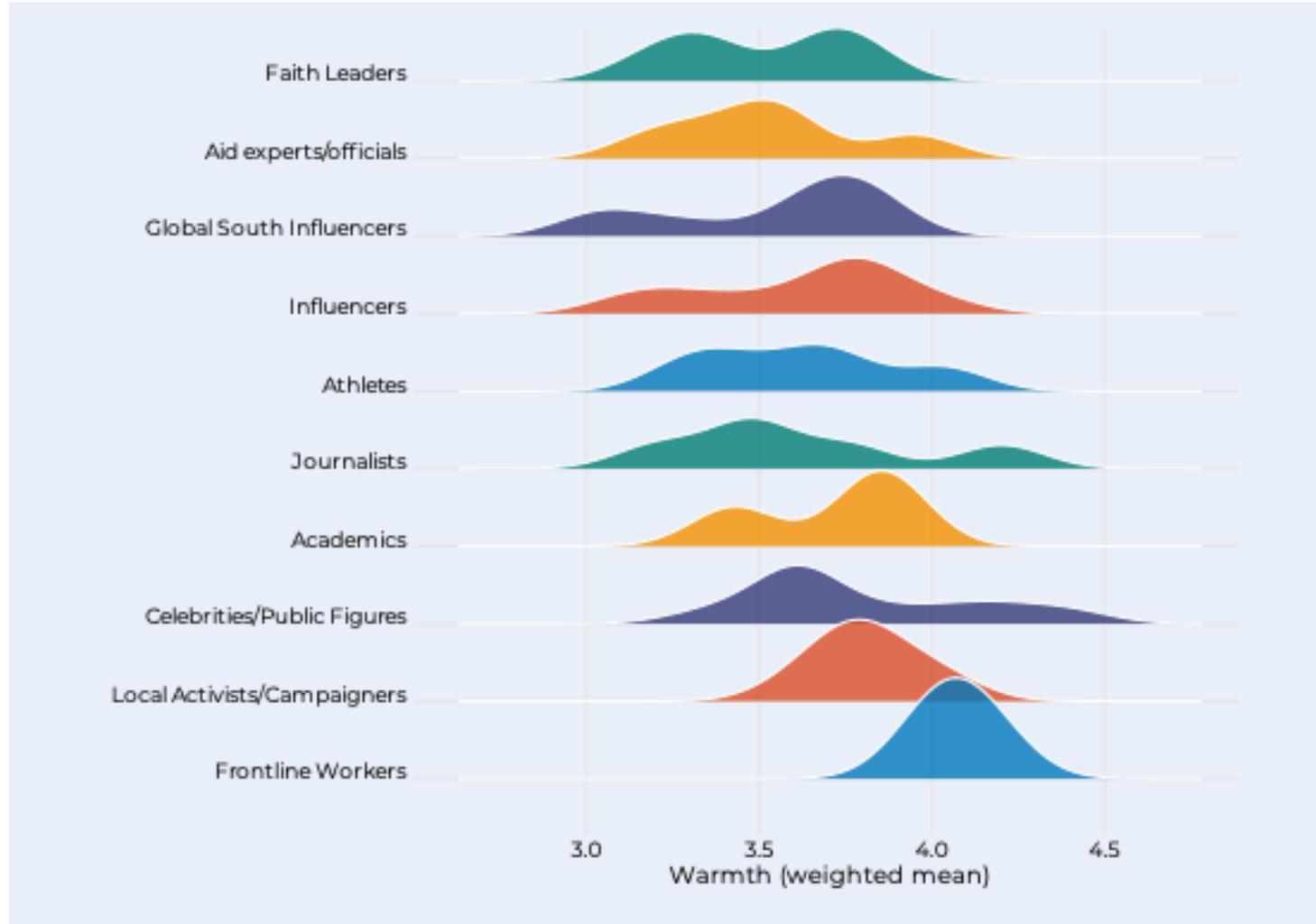


- The British public are most familiar with celebrities/public figures, journalists, and athletes
- Prince William, Kate Middleton, and King Charles are the most familiar messengers, followed by David Attenborough
- They are less familiar with aid experts, global south influencers, academics, frontline workers, and local activists (the latter two because they're fictional!)
- Influencers are less familiar to the British public compared to traditional messengers

Question: Have you heard of [NAME] before? | Sample size n = 8243 | Base: GB adults | Data are weighted to be nationally representative | Fieldwork by YouGov 30 October - 19 November 2025



# PERCEPTIONS OF WARMTH BY MESSENGER GROUP

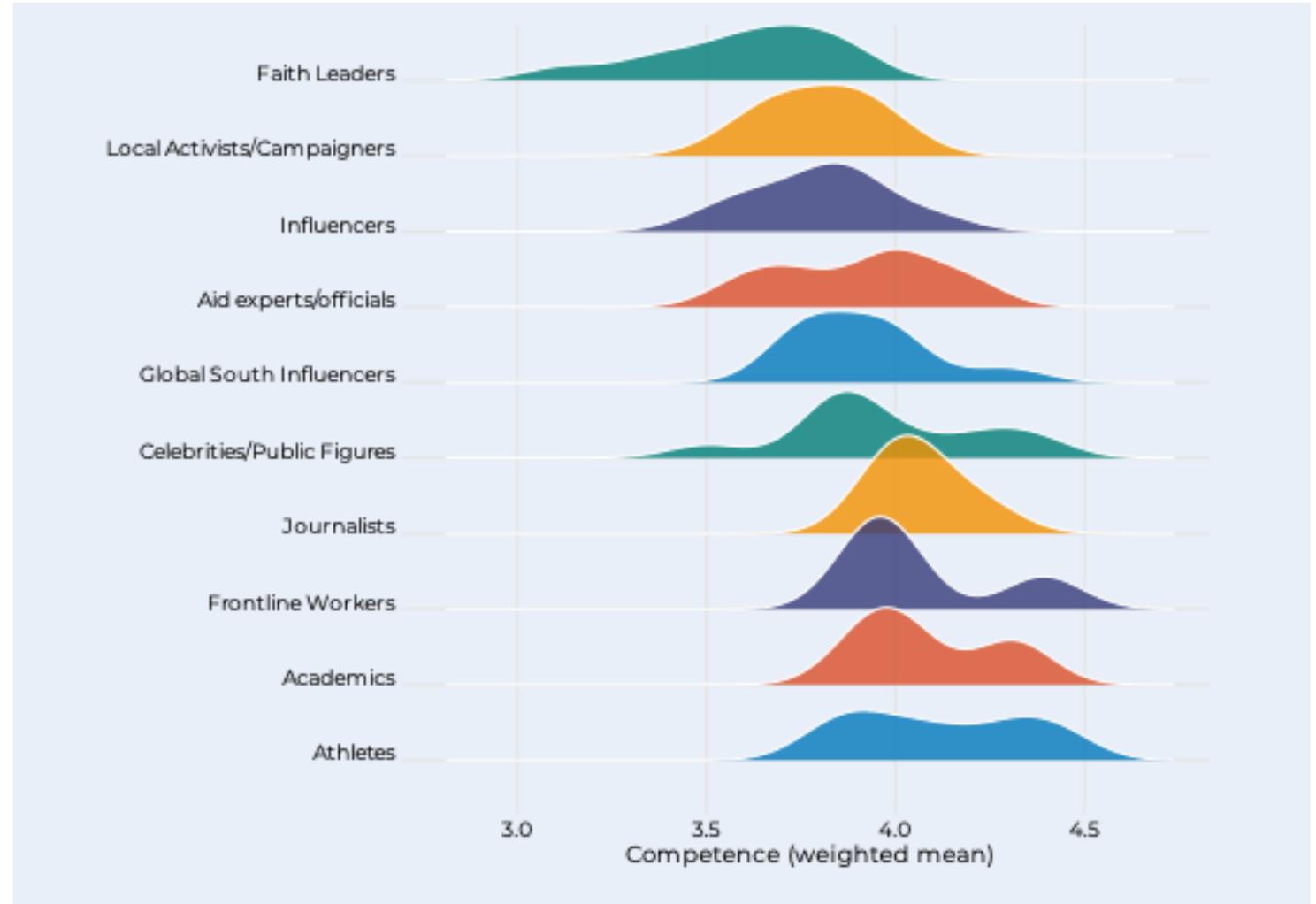


- **Warmth:** frontline workers, celebrities/public figures & local activists/campaigners rank top on average, and faith leaders and aid experts rank lower
- **Warmth lifts all messengers:** when the respondents perceive warmth, they are more likely to agree
- **Who responds to warmth?** All age groups, both male and female, and all voter types tend to agree more with messengers they perceive as warm

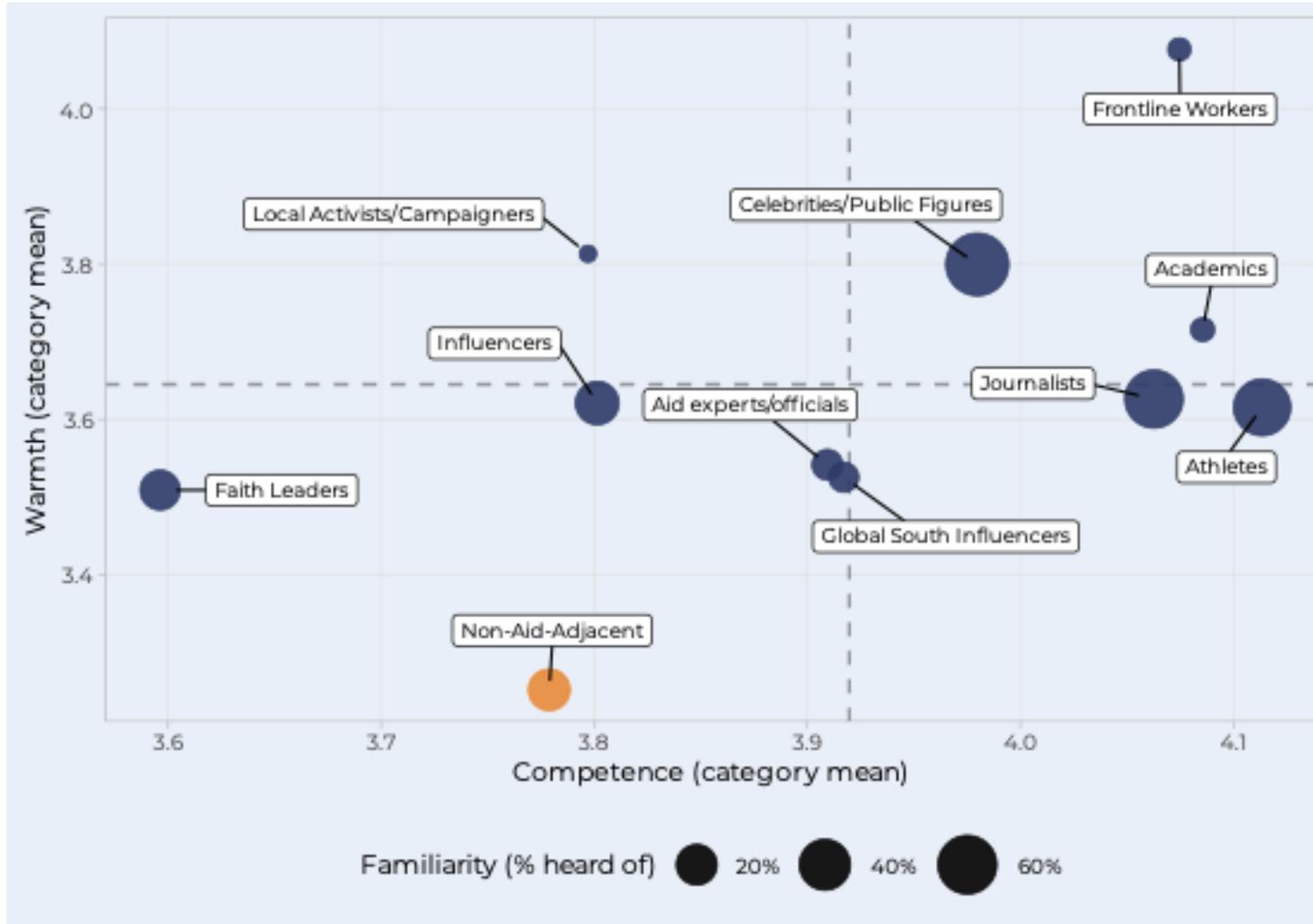


# PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE BY MESSENGER GROUP

- Athletes, academics & frontline workers rank top in perceived competence
- Competence lifts messengers who are not seen to be knowledgeable – influencers, global south influencers, activists
- But doesn't impact support for aid for other messenger groups



# WARMTH & COMPETENCE BY MESSENGER TYPE



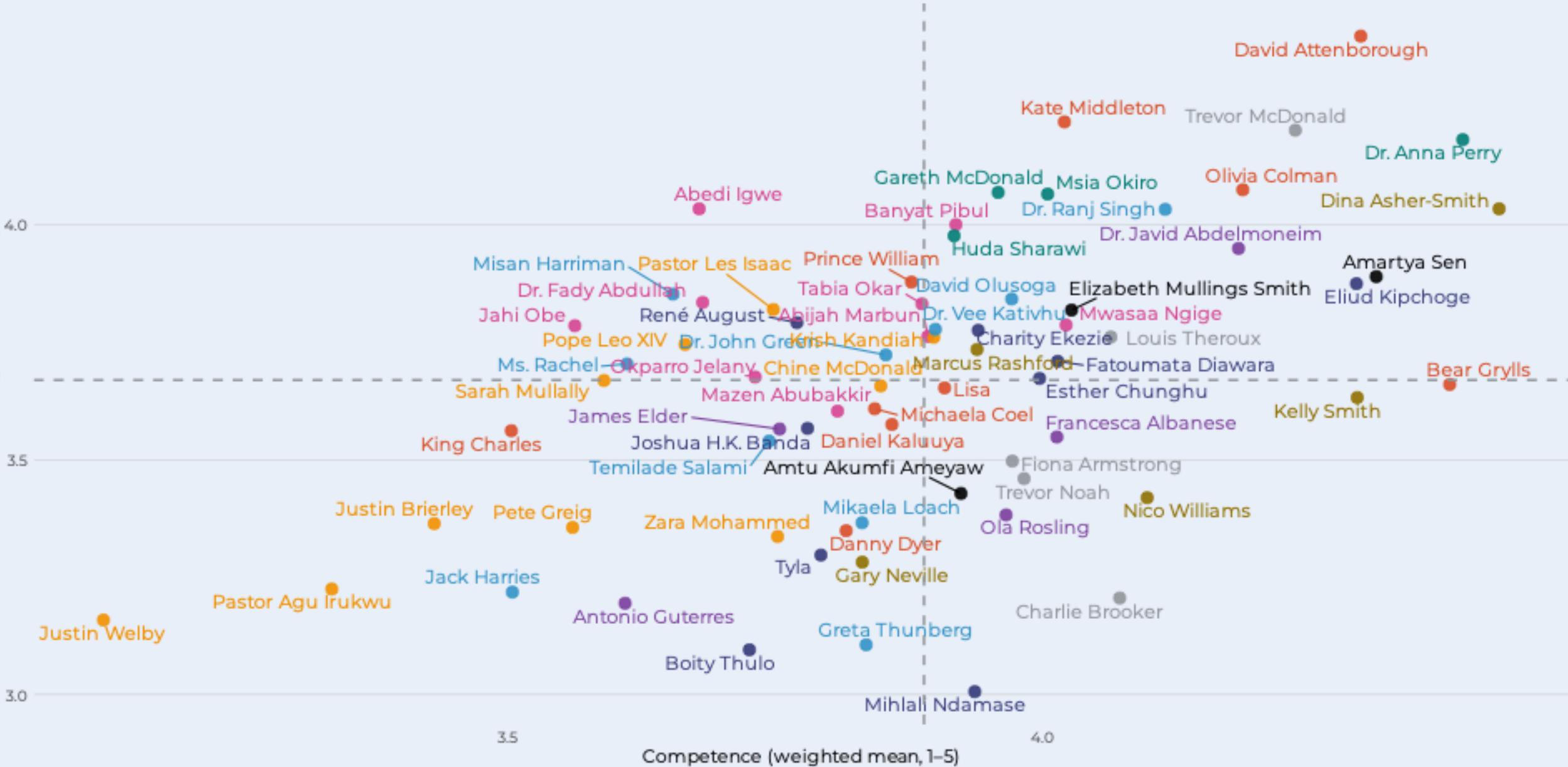
- Warmth and competence capture fundamental dimensions of how individuals perceive others and influence support for aid
- We ask a set of questions around warmth and competence to judge how the public perceives the messengers
- We see variation in perception across the messenger types – **frontline workers, celebrities/public figures, and academics** rank above average on the two dimensions
- Activists are perceived as warm but not competent
- Journalists, athletes, aid experts/officials, and GS influencers are considered competent but not as warm
- **Influencers** and **faith leaders** are perceived neither warm nor competent





# Aid-Adjacent Messengers: Warmth and Competence (Overall GB Sample)

Warmth (weighted mean, 1-5)



- Academics
- Athletes
- Faith Leaders
- Global South Influencers
- Journalists
- Aid experts/officials
- Celebrities/Public Figures
- Frontline Workers
- Influencers
- Local Activists/Campaigners

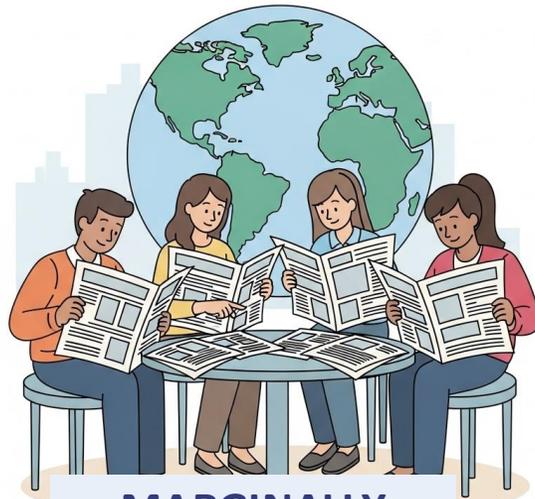
**GEN Z**



**PARENTS**



## **DEEP DIVE: 3 KEY AUDIENCES**



**MARGINALLY  
ENGAGED**

# GEN-Z (18-24)



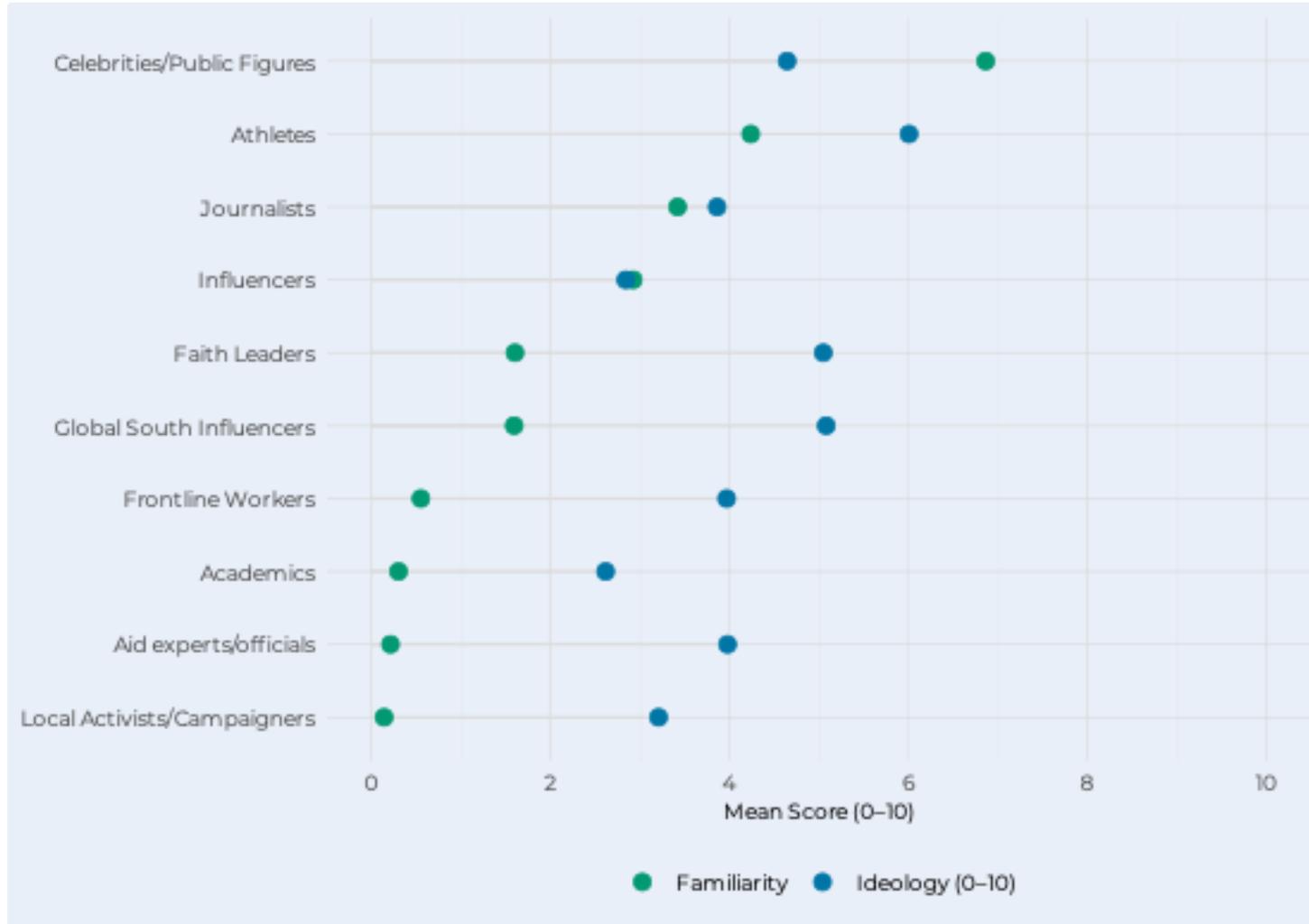
# 18-24 MESSENGER RATING: WARMTH & COMPETENCE



- 18–24-year-olds perceive journalists, academics and frontline workers to be the most competent.
- In terms of warmth, academics, frontline workers, and local activists rank top.



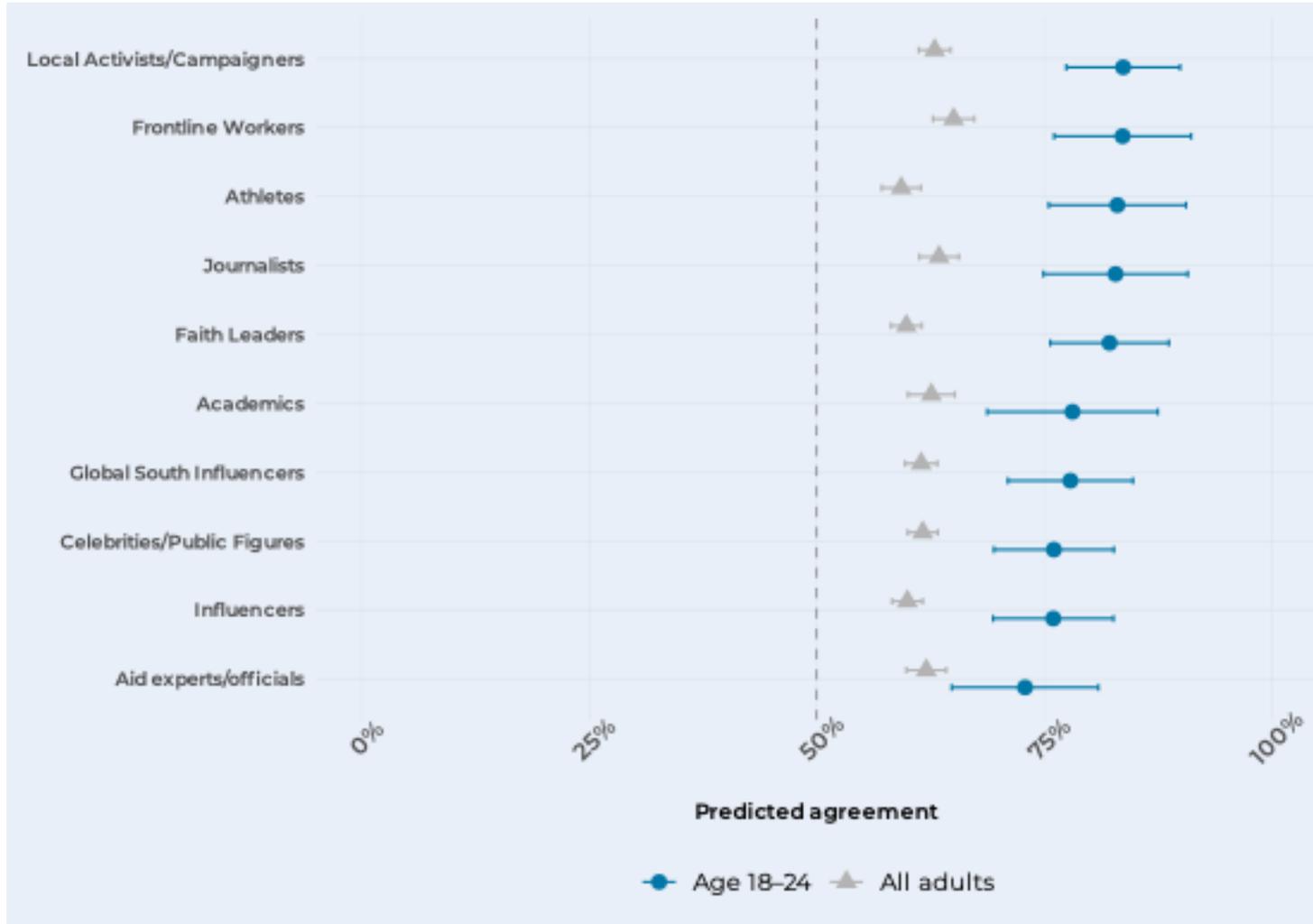
# 18-24S MESSENGER RATING: FAMILIARITY & IDEOLOGY



- They're most familiar with celebrities/public figures, and least with academics, aid experts and (fictional) activists/campaigners.
- On a left-right scale (0-10), they feel that athletes lean the most right, and academics, aid experts and local activists lean the most left.



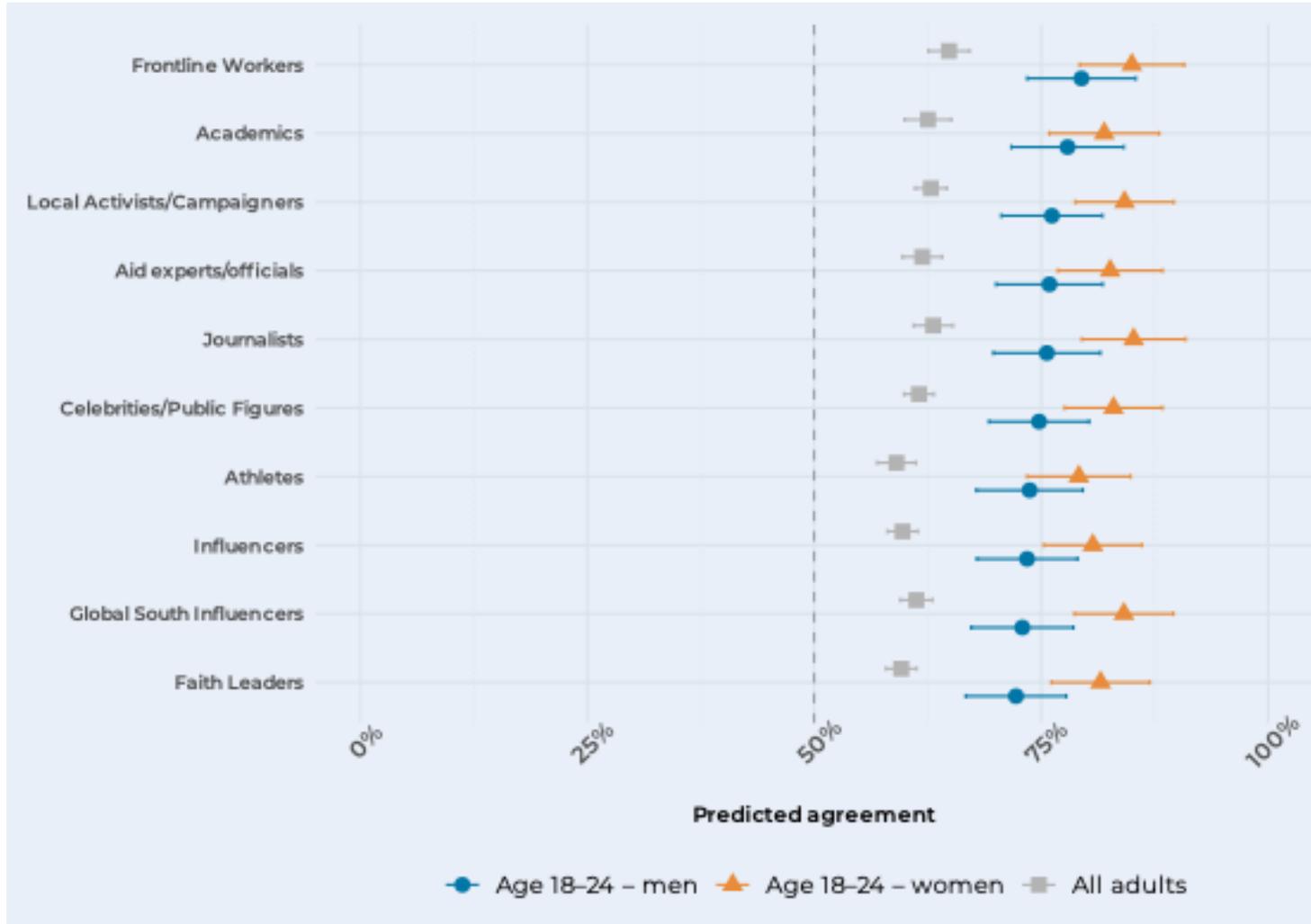
# WHICH GROUPS MATTER FOR SUPPORT FOR AID'



- Recall we gave messengers the same message and asked how much they agree with pro-aid statement from the messenger. Which groups performed the best? Which ones performed the worst?
- Local activists/campaigners and frontline workers were most influential, whereas aid experts/officials and influencers were least influential.
- **However!** There are no differences among the groups: no single group works statistically better than another. It's about individuals.
- Gen Z are more likely to support aid than GB adults.



# GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SUPPORT FOR AID



- There are only small gender differences, however.
- For all categories, male 18-24 year olds show a lower level of agreement with the messengers than female 18-24s.
- The only statistical in messenger group is global south influencers (GSI) , where women are more likely to support aid.
- In other words, young women are slightly more supportive of aid, but save for GSI, the messenger group doesn't really matter for young people in getting them to support aid. Again, it's individuals!





Diawara (GS influencer)



Williams (athlete)



Obe (activist/campaigner)



Grylls (celebrity)

## WHAT LIFTS MESSENGERS FOR 18-24 YEAR OLDS?

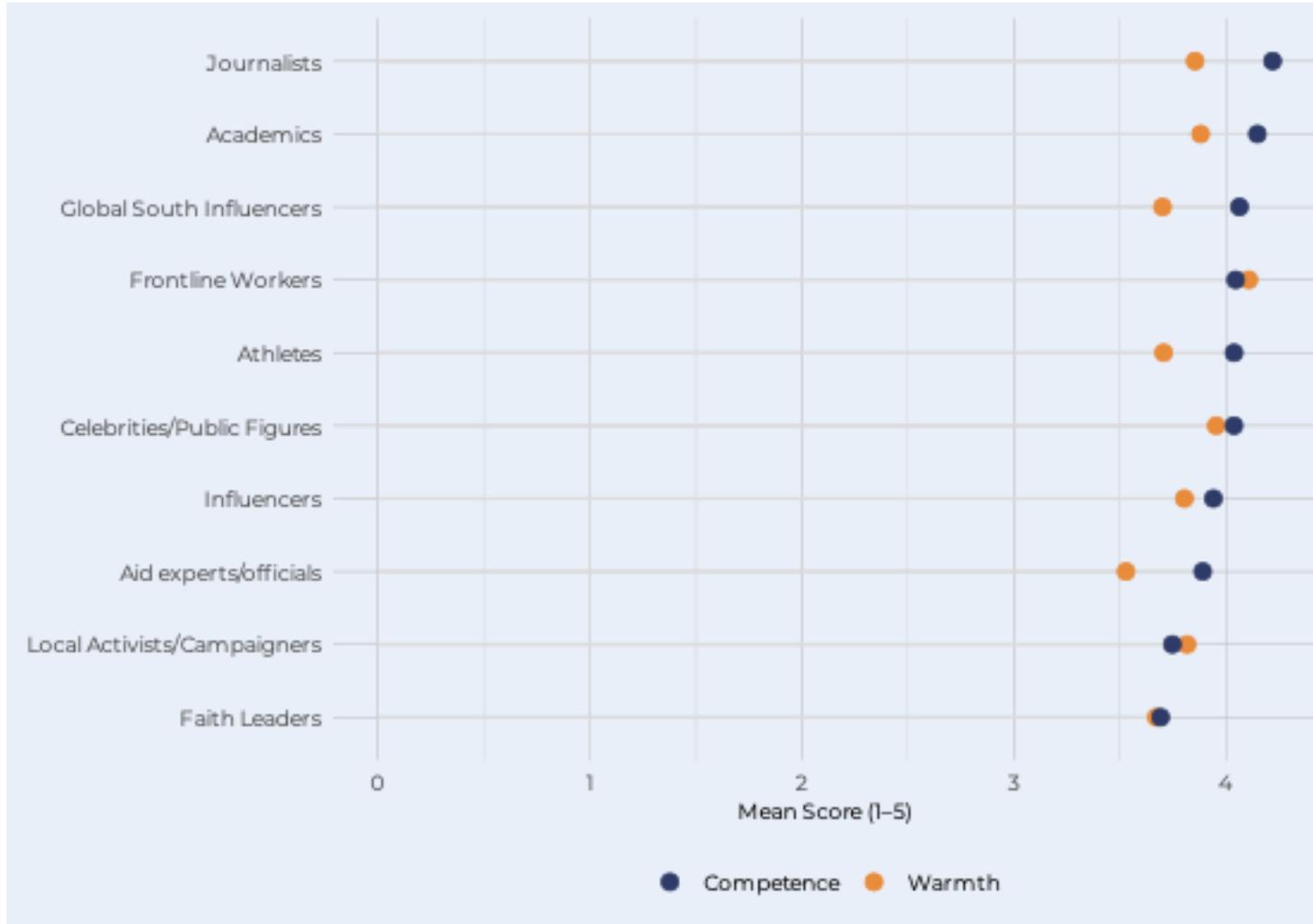
- Warmth is a strong driver of agreement for 18-24 year-olds
- Warmth alone, does not do all the work: ideological alignment matters too, although to a smaller degree
- Familiarity and competence matter less for 18-24 year olds



# PARENTS



# HOW DO PARENTS RATE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF MESSENGERS?



- **Competence:** Parents perceive journalists and academics as the most competent.
- Global south influencers, frontline workers, athletes and celebrities rank in the top half.
- **Warmth:** Frontline workers and celebrities/public figures rank top.
- Aid experts/officials are seen as least warm (echoing 2016 messenger work).

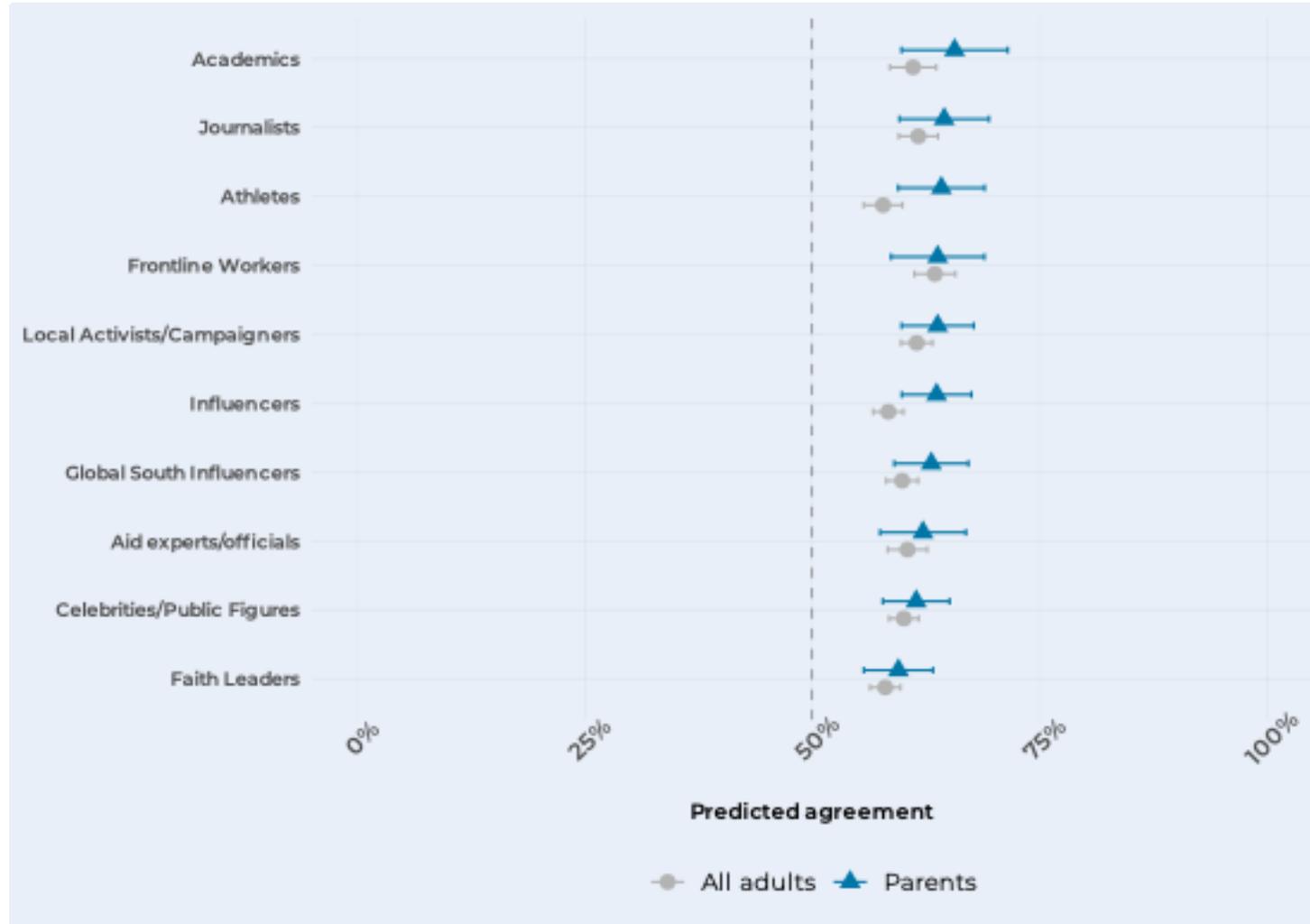


# HOW DO PARENTS RATE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF MESSENGERS?



- Parents are most familiar with celebrities/public figures, journalists and athletes.
- They are least familiar with aid experts and academics (as well as activists and frontline workers, but remember the latter two are fictional so it's ok).

# WHICH GROUPS MATTER FOR SUPPORT FOR AID?



- Recall we gave messengers the same message and asked how much they agree with the messenger. Which groups performed the best? Which ones performed the worst?
- Academics and journalists garnered the most agreement, whereas faith leaders and celebrities/public figures got the least agreement.
- Note that the differences are not statistically significant – **individuals matter more than groups.**





## WHAT LIFTS MESSENGERS FOR PARENTS?

- Competence & warmth are strongest drivers of support for aid (agreement)
- Ideological alignment matters, but less
- Familiarity not significant
- Warmth and competence are necessary but not sufficient conditions; align ideologically to increase support



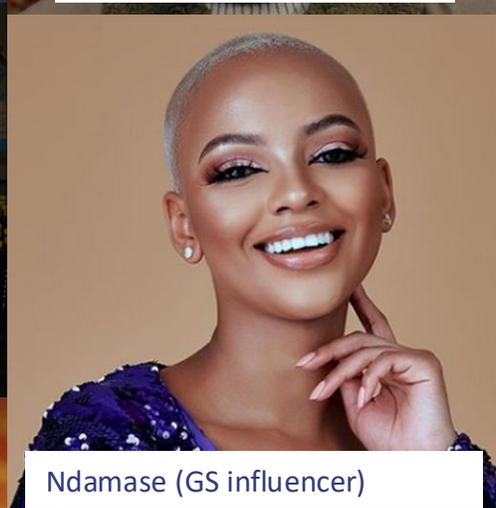
Ekezie (GS influencer)



Harries (aid-adjacent influencer)



Marbun (local activist/campaigner)



Ndamase (GS influencer)



August (faith leader)



# MARGINALLY ENGAGED



Largest of the DEL audience engagement segments

# MARGINALLY ENGAGED RATING: WARMTH & COMPETENCE



- Marginally Engaged audiences perceive athletes, frontline workers, journalists and academics as the most **competent**.
- In terms of **warmth**, frontline workers, local activists, and celebrities/public figures rank top.

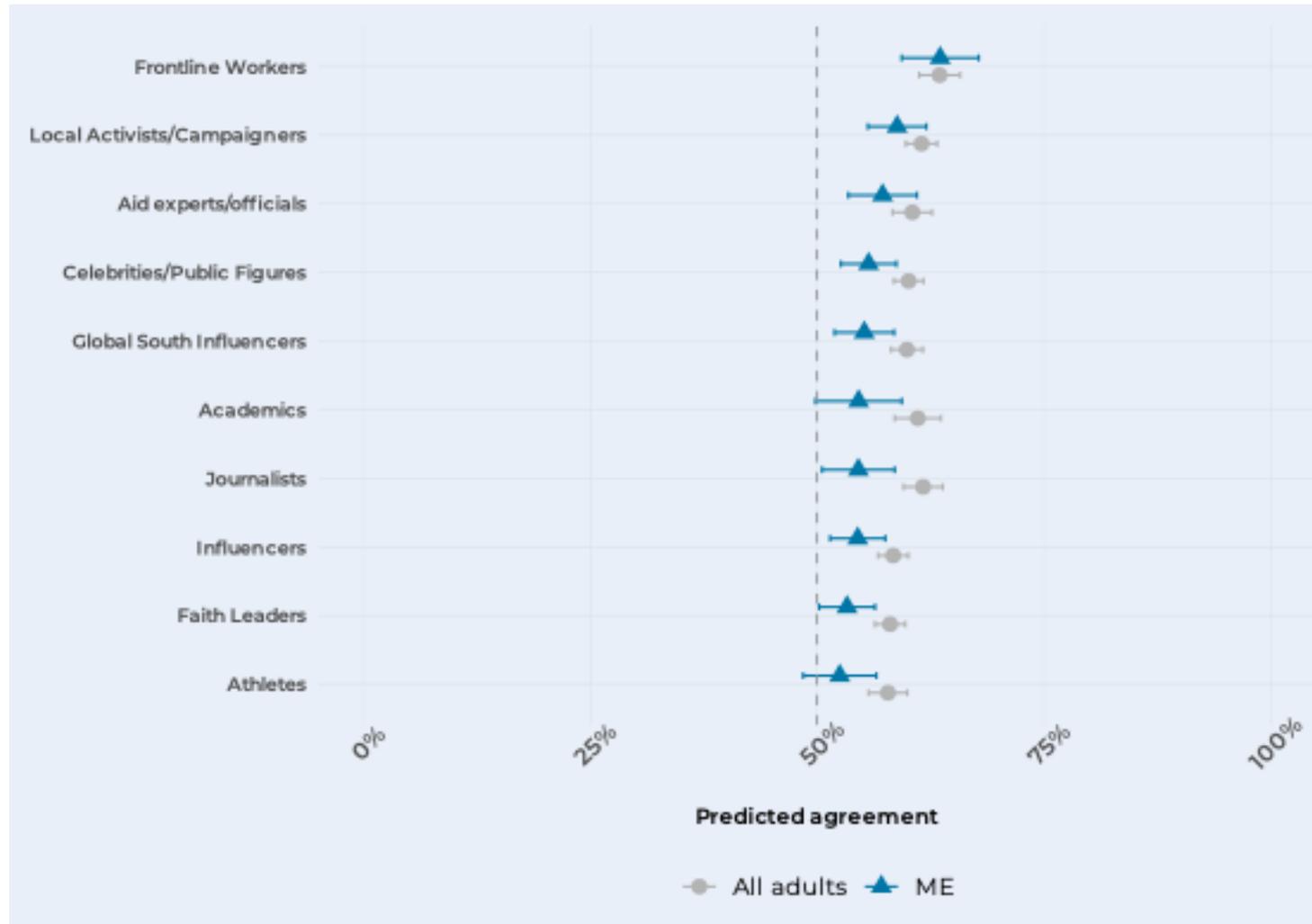
# MARGINALLY ENGAGED RATING: FAMILIARITY & IDEOLOGY



- Marginally engaged are most familiar with celebrities/public figures and journalists.
- They perceive local activists, influencers and academics as left-leaning.
- Celebrities/public figures sit closer to the centre of the ideological spectrum – but they see everyone to the left of centre.



# WHICH GROUPS MATTER FOR SUPPORT FOR AID?



- We showed respondents the same message and asked how much they agree with the messenger.
- Frontline workers, local activists/campaigners, and aid experts/officials gained the most agreement/support, whereas faith leaders and athletes gained the least agreement.
- There's no significant difference in agreement between frontline workers, local activists, and aid experts, but
- **Frontline workers are more effective compared to celebrities, GS influencers, academics, etc.** Relatability matters; doing something matters.



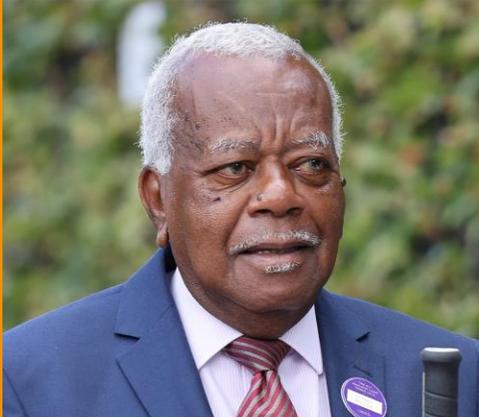




Okiro (frontline worker)



August (faith leader)



McDonald (journalist)



Abdelmoneim (aid expert)

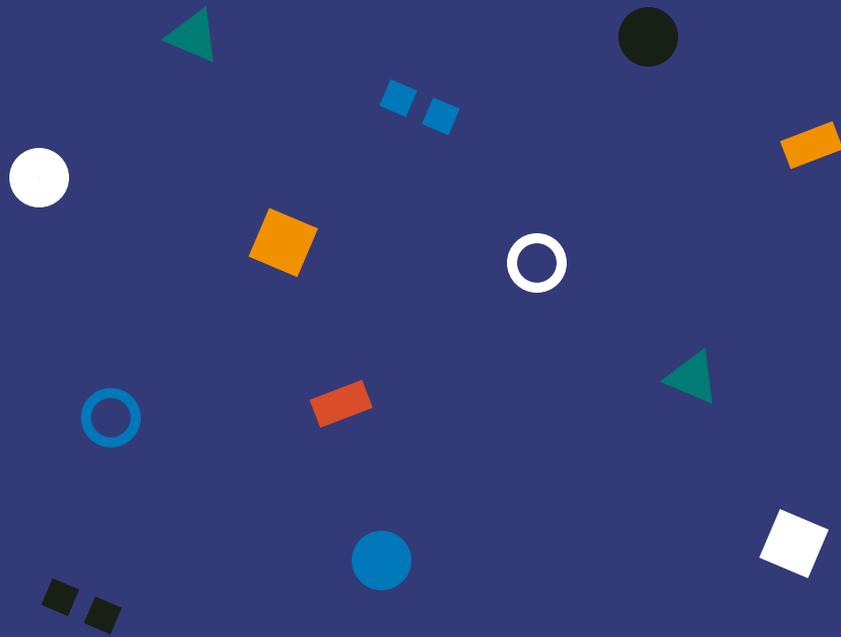
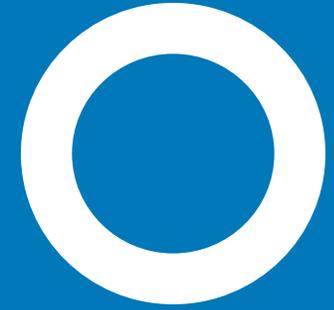


Ngige (local activist/campaigner)

## WHAT LIFTS MESSENGERS FOR MARGINALLY ENGAGED AUDIENCES?

- Warmth drives agreement with messengers for Marginally Engaged audiences
- Competence and ideological alignment matters but less
- Go for warmth first, but layer with competence and ideological alignment
- Go for do-ers

# ENTRY POINTS



# ENTRY POINTS: WHO CAN WE BRING TO OUR ISSUES & VIA WHICH TOPICS?

Which areas could the messenger credibly talk about or give advice on?

- Parenting and family life
- Food, nutrition, and health
- Education and learning
- Money, work, and economic opportunity
- Environment and climate change
- Humanitarian crises and global poverty
- Human rights and social justice
- Community and volunteering
- News and current affairs
- Faith, values, and morality

# ENTRY POINTS MAP FOR GB PUBLIC

## 1. Parenting and family life

- Flagship messengers: **Kate Middleton**, Prince William, Ms Rachel

## 2. Food, nutrition, and health

- Flagship messengers: **Dr. Ranj Singh, Dr. Javid Abdelmoneim, Dr. Anna Perry**

## 3. Education and learning

- Flagship messengers: **David Attenborough**, Ms. Rachel, Tabia Okar

## 4. Money, work, and economic opportunity

- Flagship messengers: **Amartya Sen, Trevor McDonald**, Ola Rosling

## 5. Environment and climate change

- Flagship messengers: **David Attenborough**, King Charles, Bear Grylls

## 6. Humanitarian crises and global poverty

- Flagship messengers: **David Attenborough**, Prince William, **Gareth McDonald**

## 7. Human rights and social justice

- Flagship messengers: Pope Leo XIV, **Huda Sharawi**, Abedi Igwe

## 8. Community and volunteering

- Flagship messengers: **Kate Middleton**, Prince William, **Marcus Rashford**

## 9. News and current affairs

- Flagship messengers : **Trevor McDonald, Louis Theroux**, Charlie Brooker

## 10. Faith, values, and morality

- Flagship messengers : Pope Leo XIV, Justin Welby, Sarah Mullally

**Green:** Messengers who are warm & competent **and** can credibly talk about the topic



# ENTRY POINTS TO DEVELOPMENT

- Start from: *'How do we give our kids the best start in life – health, education, feeling safe and supported?'* This is a universal concern for parents?
- Move to: *'Parents everywhere want the same things for their children'*
- Use the messenger to show that **the same concerns exist globally:** vaccines, nutrition, early years learning, safe homes
- Land on development:
  - Child health services and vaccines in low-income countries
  - Pre-school & primary education
  - Nutrition programmes and school meals
  - Support for parents (cash transfers, community health workers)

# FROM INSIGHT TO IMPACT: WHAT NOW?

- Groups
  - Groups aren't telling us as much as we might think, it's all about the messengers themselves
  - Faith leaders are not pathways to parents
- Frontline workers still work!
- Messengers
  - Fatoumata Diawara (GS influencer)
  - Dr. Anna Perry / Huda Sharawi / Gareth McDonald (Frontline workers)
  - Dr. Javid Abdelmoneim (Aid expert)
  - Dr. Ranj Singh (Influencer)
  - Amartya Sen (Academic)
- Warmth (likeability) is always going to help



# NON-AID- ADJACENT MESSENGERS



# NON-AID-ADJACENT MESSENGERS

- Large untapped market of messengers who have not (yet) expressed any support for global development

**How does the public perceive them? What are the entry points for them to become champions of development?**

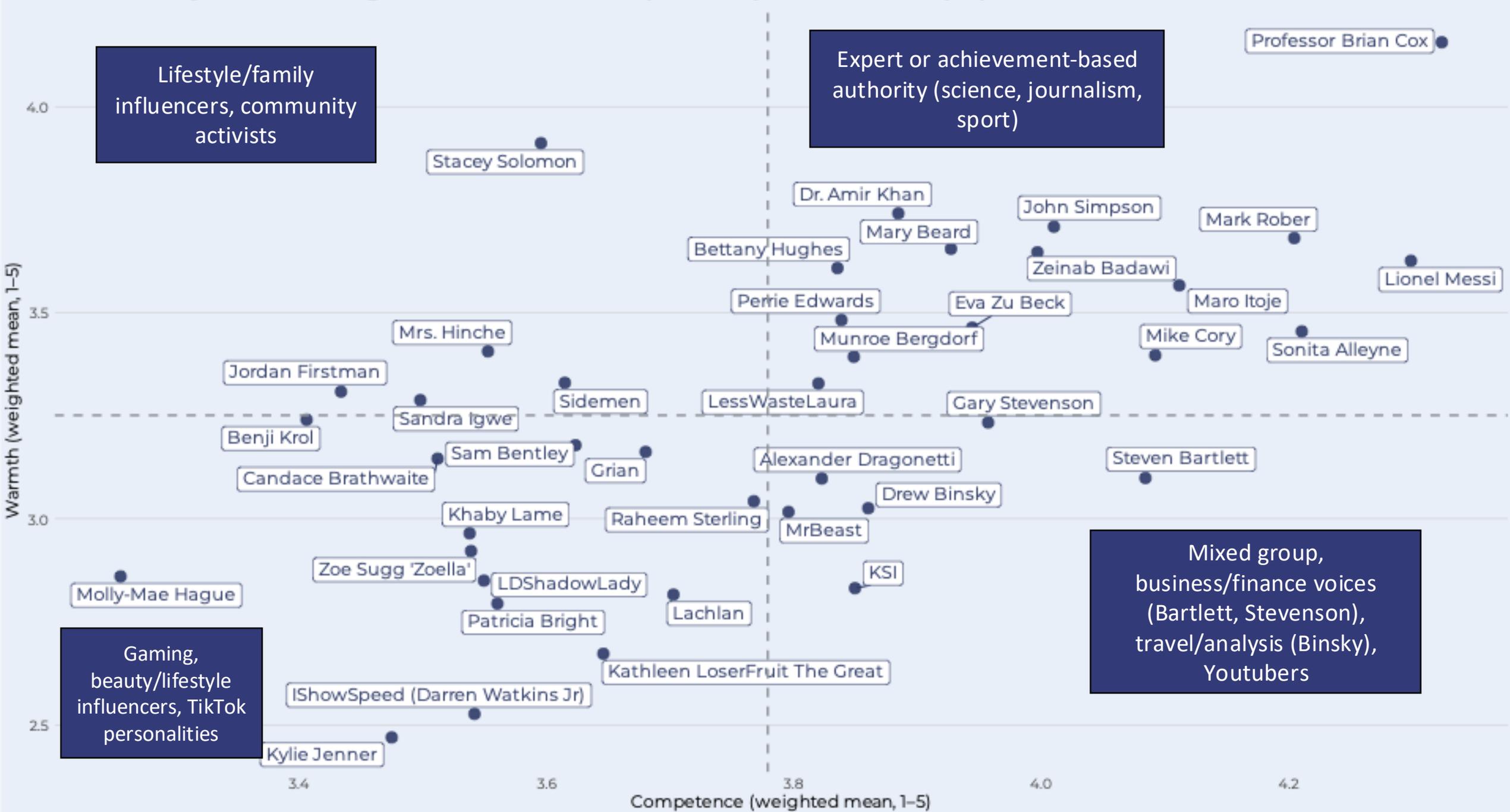
# NON-AID-ADJACENT MESSENGERS

- Sample of 40 non-aid-adjacent messengers who sit in diverse spaces, from news, world affairs & public understanding (e.g., Alexander Dragonetti) to gamers, streamers & digital entertainers (e.g., Grian, LDShadowLady). Mostly 'pure influencers'.
- This time, we take a different approach. We don't ask about their support for aid, but we still ask them about the same traits (     ) and the topics they can credibly speak to.

# WARMTH AND COMPETENCE

- We know from our analysis of aid-adjacent messengers that **warmth and competence** are the two main traits that 'lift' messengers for the GB public
- **How do the non-aid-adjacent messengers fare on these dimensions?**

# Non-Aid-Adjacent Messengers: Warmth and Competence (Overall GB Sample)



# AUDIENCE DEEP DIVE

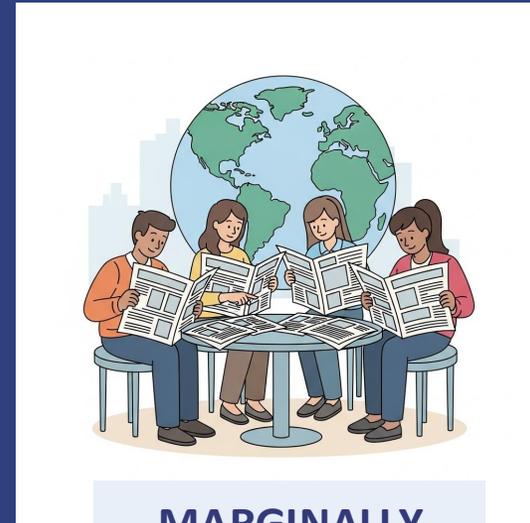
- From the analysis earlier, we know what traits ‘lift’ messengers for different audiences.
- We apply these traits as ‘clues’ to understand which non-aid-adjacent messengers would work best for these audiences



**GEN Z**



**PARENTS**



**MARGINALLY  
ENGAGED**



# GEN-Z

- Recall, **warmth** and **ideological alignment** were what drove Gen-Zs to agree with aid-adjacent messengers about the statement around development
- We apply these two dimensions to non-aid-adjacent messengers to understand 'best' and 'worst' performers

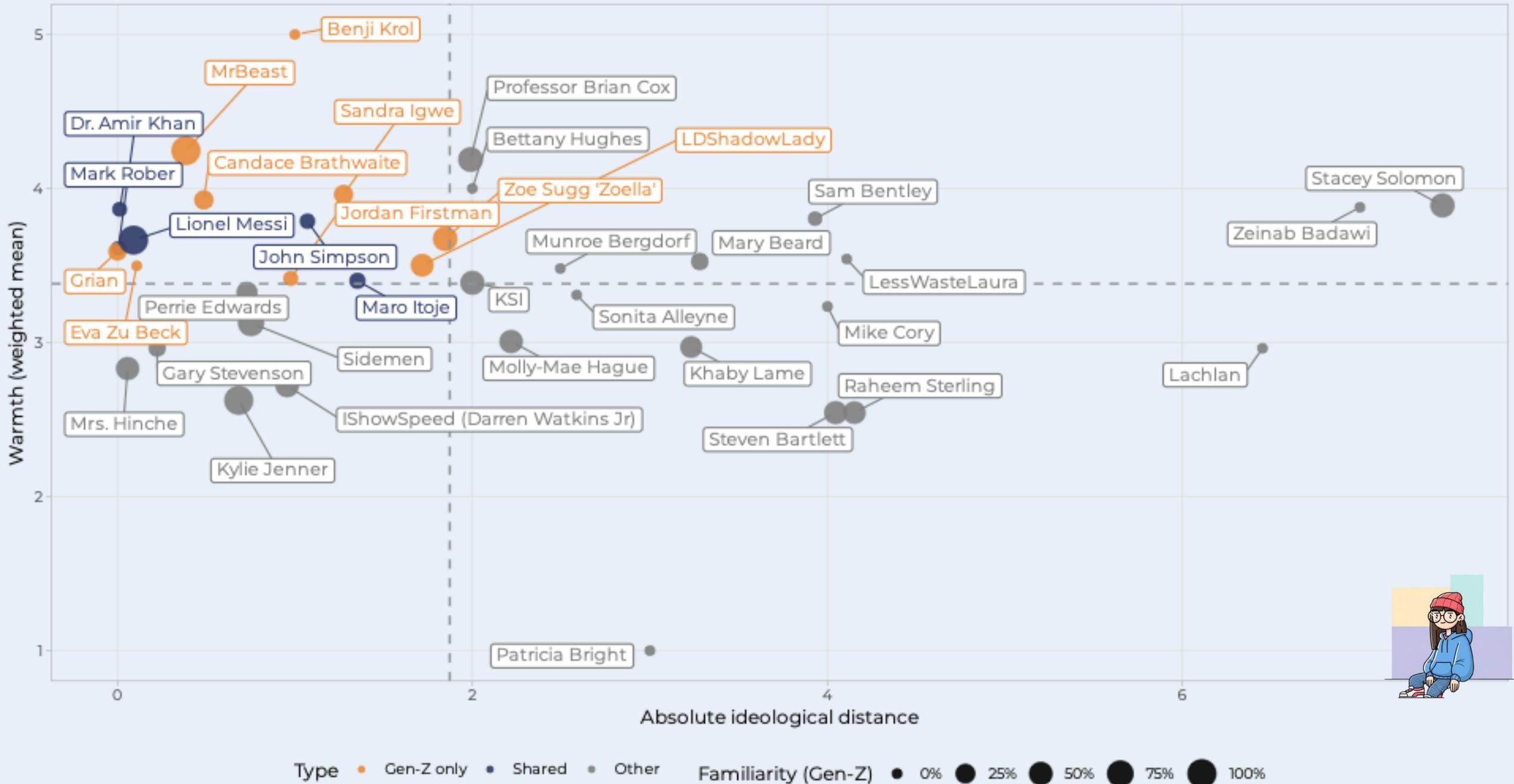


WARMTH

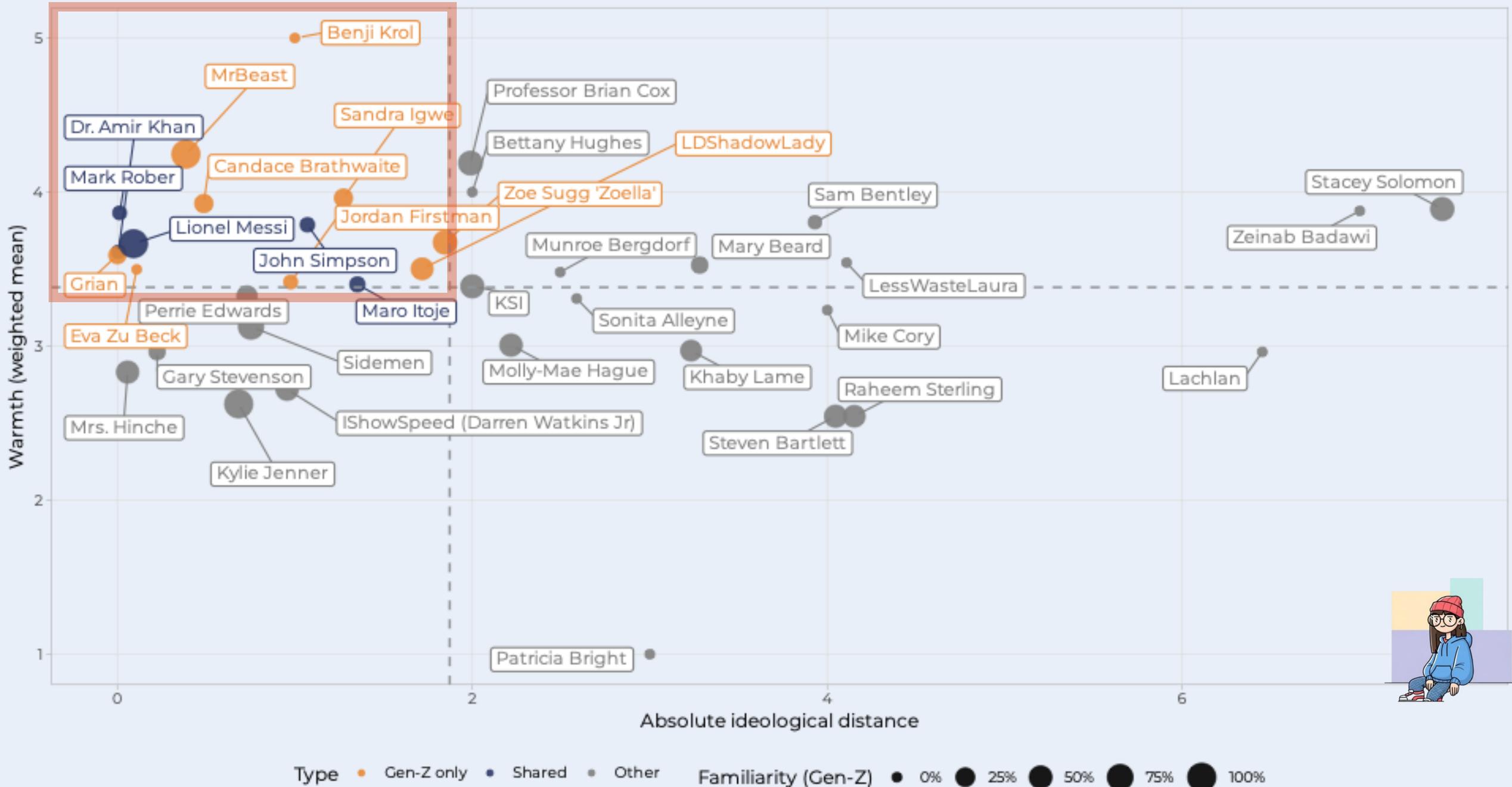


IDEOLOGICAL  
ALIGNMENT

# Non-Aid-Adjacent Messengers: Warmth and Ideological Alignment (Gen-Z Sample)



# Non-Aid-Adjacent Messengers: Warmth and Ideological Alignment (Gen-Z Sample)



# NON-AID-ADJACENT MESSENGERS FOR GEN-ZS



## USE

- Messengers who are warm and ideologically aligned
- Creators who feel **authentic, approachable, and 'one of us'** (e.g., Benji Krol, LDShadowLady, Grian).
- **Soft authorities** who are seen as **warm, trustworthy (competent) and non-divisive** (e.g., Mark Rober, Dr. Amir Khan)

## DO NOT USE

- Messengers who don't embody a 'warm' tone and/or are ideologically polarising
- **Older, authoritative, or institutional messengers** (e.g., Mary Beard, John Simpson). They have a broad appeal to the general public (warm and competent), but **not relatable to Gen-Zs**.
- **Politically charged or issue-driven messengers** (e.g., LessWasteLaura, Munroe Bergdorf, Sam Bentley). **This generates ideological distance from Gen-Zs.**
- **Commercial lifestyle influencers** (e.g., Kylie Jenner) and **hyper-masculine, entrepreneurial, or provocative brand identities** (e.g., IShowSpeed, Steven Bartlett). These messengers are perceived as **less warm and ideologically distant.**





# PARENTS

- Recall that **competence and warmth** were what drove parents to agree with aid-adjacent messengers about the statement around development
- **Ideological alignment** mattered too, to a smaller degree
- We apply these two dimensions to non-aid-adjacent messengers to understand 'best' and 'worst' performers



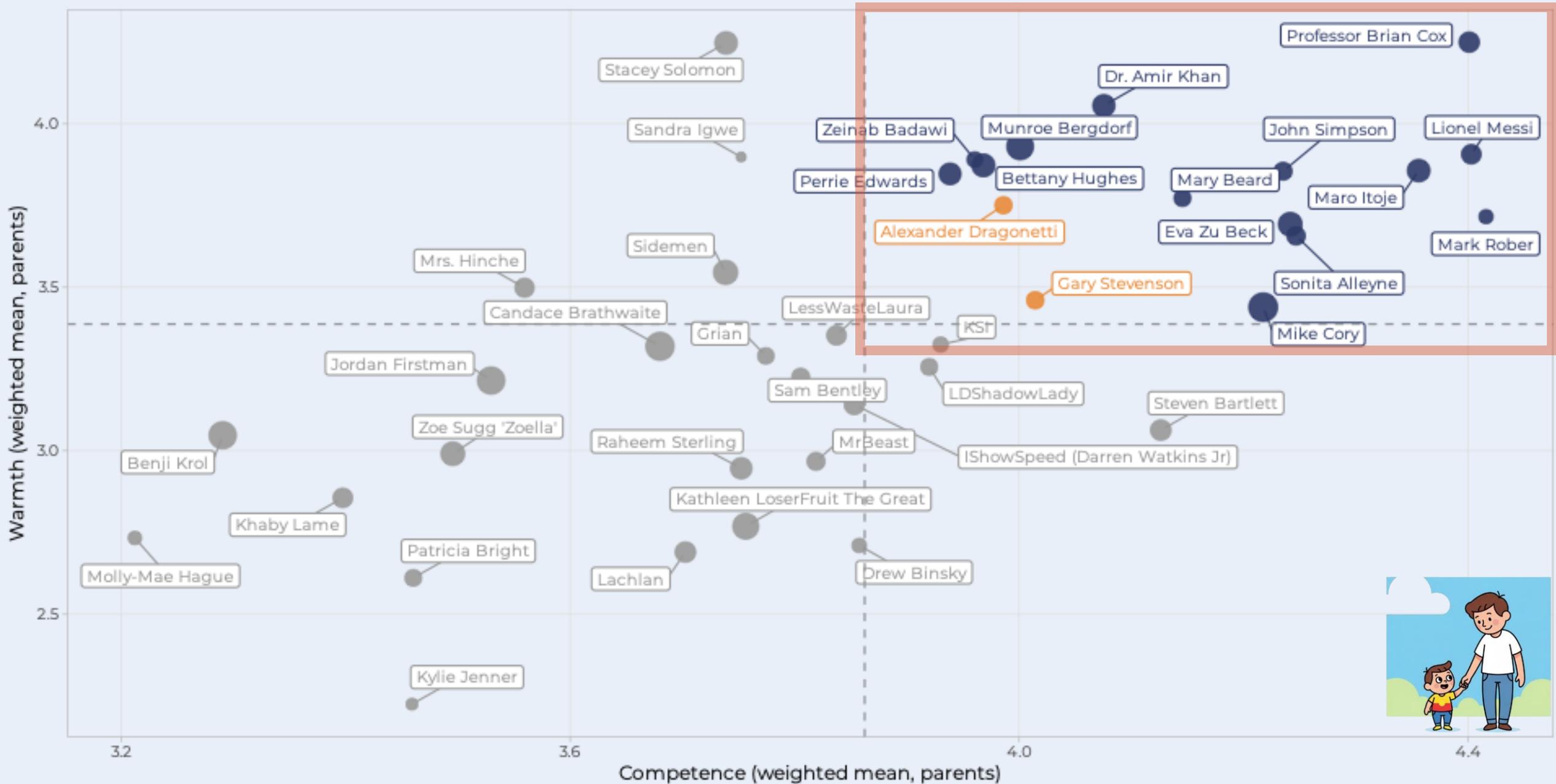
COMPETENCE



WARMTH



IDEOLOGICAL  
ALIGNMENT



# NON-AID-ADJACENT MESSENGERS FOR PARENTS



## USE

- Parents place **strong weight on competence**. These messengers often have professional authority or domain expertise.
- Example: **Professor Brian Cox** (science credibility), **Dr. Amir Khan** (medical authority), **Mark Rober** (engineering credibility + educational content), **Maro Itoje** (respected athlete with leadership persona), and **John Simpson** (trusted journalist)
- **Mature, professional public persona** are perceived as warm, competent, and non-polarising by parents. E.g., Zeinab Badawi (TV presenter, president of SOAS).

## DO NOT USE

- Messengers **who lack clear expertise or credibility and perceived with less warmth**
- **Entertainment- or personality-driven messengers** without a competence signal
- Messengers who feel **Gen-Z oriented**
- Examples: Benji Krol, Kylie Jenner, Grian/LDShadowLady/Lachlan/IShowSpeed
- **⚠ Be cautious of using messengers who are seen as ideologically distant** from parents, even if perceived as competent/warm. Parents are **sensitive** to ideological alignment (e.g., Munroe Bergdorf, Mike Corey, Perrie Edwards)





# MARGINALLY ENGAGED

- Recall that warmth was the main driver for Marginally Engaged audiences, followed by competence and ideological alignment.
- We apply these findings to non-aid-adjacent messengers to understand 'best' and 'worst' performers



**WARMTH**

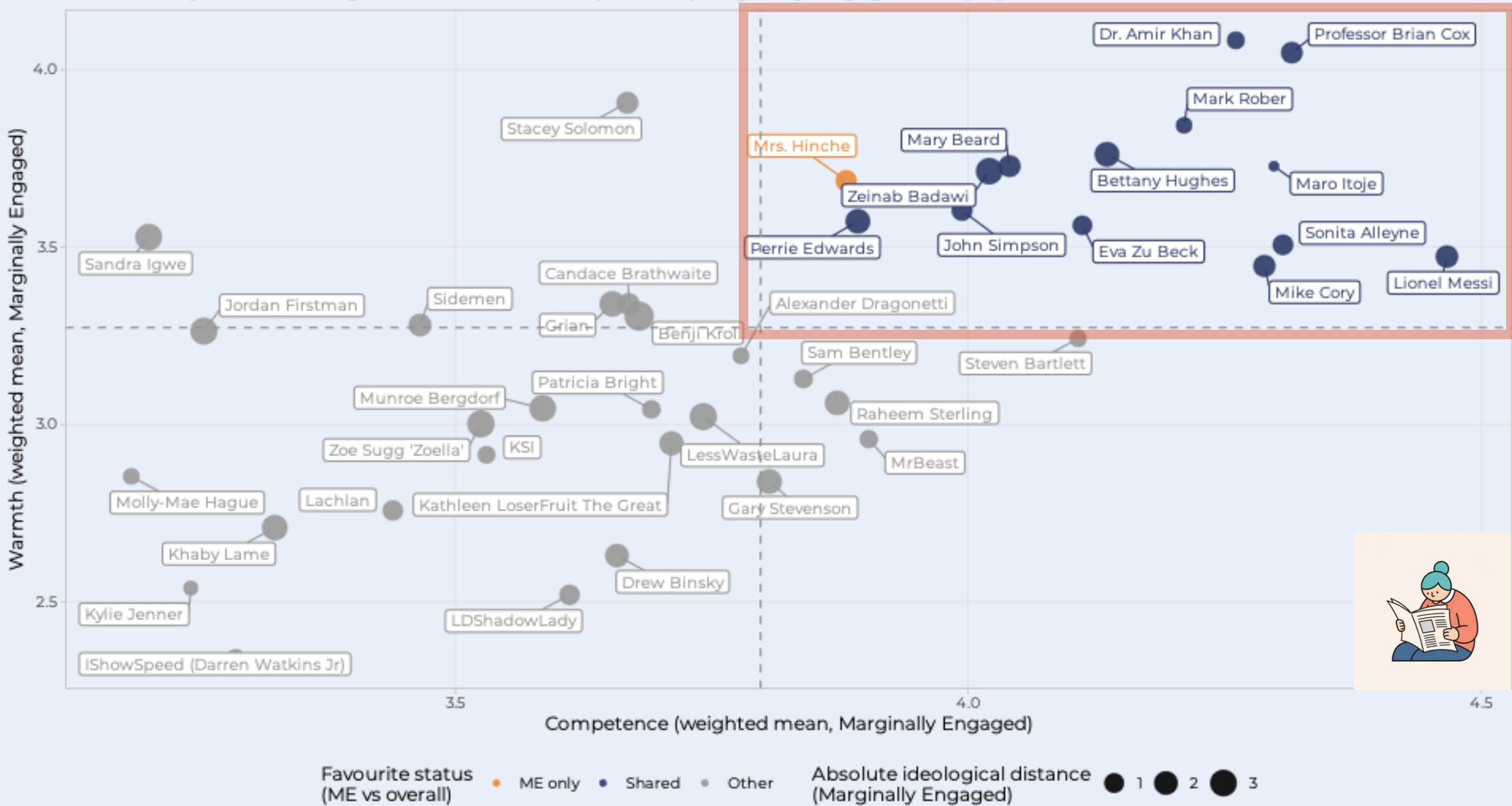


**COMPETENCE**



**IDEOLOGICAL  
ALIGNMENT**

# Non-Aid-Adjacent Messengers: Warmth and Competence (Marginally Engaged Sample)



# NON-AID-ADJACENT MESSENGERS FOR THE MARGINALLY ENGAGED



## USE

- Warm and competent messengers who are non-controversial
- Messengers with **domain expertise** are seen as both **warm and competent** (e.g., Professor Brian Cox, Mark Rober, Dr. Amir Khan, Maro Itoje)
- **Messengers with a professional persona** are also seen as warm and competent (e.g., Sonita Alleyne – media executive & first black female head of Oxbridge College)

## DO NOT USE

- Messengers who are perceived low in warmth and competence and ideologically distant/controversial
- High-energy **online entertainers** (e.g., IShowSpeed, KSI, Lachlan) and **lifestyle & beauty influencers** (e.g., Kylie Jenner, Zoe Sugg (Zoella))
- **⚠ Be cautious of using messengers who are seen as ideologically distant** from MEs, even if perceived as competent/warm (e.g., Perrie Edward, John Simpson, Zeinab Badawi)



# ENTRY POINTS: WHO CAN WE BRING TO OUR ISSUES & VIA WHICH TOPICS?

Which areas could the messenger credibly talk about or give advice on?

- Parenting and family life
- Food, nutrition, and health
- Education and learning
- Money, work, and economic opportunity
- Environment and climate change
- Humanitarian crises and global poverty
- Human rights and social justice
- Community and volunteering
- News and current affairs
- Faith, values, and morality

# ENTRY POINTS MAP

## 1. Parenting and family life

- **Flagship messengers:** Stacey Solomon, Mrs. Hinche, Candace Brathwaite

## 2. Food, nutrition, and health

- **Flagship messengers:** **Dr. Amir Khan**, **Lionel Messi**, Raheem Sterling

## 3. Education and learning

- **Flagship messengers:** **Professor Brian Cox**, Sonita Alleyne, **Mark Rober**

## 4. Money, work, and economic opportunity

- **Flagship messengers:** **Gary Stevenson**, Steven Bartlett, **MrBeast**

## 5. Environment and climate change

- **Flagship messengers:** **Professor Brian Cox**, LessWasteLaura, Sam Bentley

## 6. Humanitarian crises and global poverty

- **Flagship messengers:** John Simpson, **Professor Brian Cox**, LessWasteLaura

## 7. Human rights and social justice

- **Flagship messengers:** **Munroe Bergdorf**, **John Simpson**, Jordan Firstman

## 8. Community and volunteering

- **Flagship messengers:** Stacey Solomon, **Lionel Messi**, **Maro Itoje**

## 9. News and current affairs

- **Flagship:** **John Simpson**, Zeinab Badawi, Alexander Dragonetti

## 10. Faith, values, and morality

- **Flagship:** Stacey Solomon, Raheem Sterling, Jordan Firstman

**Green:** Messengers who warm & competent **and** can credibly talk about the topic



# WHICH NON-AID-ADJACENT MESSENGERS WORK WITH EVERYONE?

- Professor Brian Cox
  - Mary Beard
- John Simpson
  - Mark Rober
  - Maro Itoje

Recipe book for non-aid-adjacent influencers: Expertise, warmth, familiar, and ideologically neutral



# FINAL TAKEAWAYS

- Warmth is key
- Competence helps but is not as impactful as in previous research
- Fewer group effects - reduced attachment to specific groups, reflecting competition in the market
- In a polarised world, ideological alignment helps. Look for people who are more neutral and less identified to carry a broader audience





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The Development Engagement Lab (DEL) is a five-year study of public attitudes and engagement with global development in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States (2018-2023).

DEL is a partner focussed research programme, convening and co-producing research and insights with over 30 international development NGOs and government agencies to understand the drivers of engagement and inform development communications.

Fieldwork is carried out by YouGov and surveys are weighted to be a nationally representative of the adult population. DEL is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and led by Professor Jennifer Hudson (University College London) and Professor David Hudson (University of Birmingham).

The **Development Engagement Lab**

(Aid Attitudes Tracker Phase 2) has three goals:

1. Co-production of an evidence base for development campaigning
2. Enabling collaboration across the sector
3. Increasing advocacy capacity through the sharing of research and strategic insights

You can find out more information about DEL research at [www.developmentcompass.org](http://www.developmentcompass.org), follow us on Twitter [@DevEngageLab](https://twitter.com/DevEngageLab) or by contacting [del@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:del@ucl.ac.uk).

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